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The Elevation of African American Society: A Comparative Critique of Richard Wright's

“Blueprint for Negro Writing” and W.E.B. DuBois’ “Criteria of Negro Art”

In his manifesto, *Blueprint for Negro Writing*, author Richard Wright wrote “today the question is: Shall Negro writing be for the Negro masses, moulding the lives and consciousness of those masses toward new goals, or shall it continue begging the question of the Negroes’ humanity” (Richard Wright 127). Thanks due in part to the efforts of Wright and W.E.B. DuBois, the latter sentiment is no longer up for debate, for African American literature is amongst the most human in the Western Canon. Wright’s aforementioned manifesto and DuBois’ *Criteria of Negro Art* shaped the legitimization of African American writing and, by extension, African Americans in society as equals to their white contemporaries by their manifestoes’ exploration of the responsibilities that come with African American nationalism, by informing the role African American writers play for the masses and by paving the way for integration. The two manifestoes are unlike in that Wright’s blueprint is a socio-political one for readers familiar with its Marxist references, while DuBois’ manifesto reads like a speech (opening with the line “I do not doubt but there are some in this audience who are a little disturbed at the subject of this meeting” (W.E.B. DuBois 771)) and is a call to arms of pen and paper for the humanist cause of creating beauty. DuBois’ implications for social reform through African American literature are as compelling as Wright’s, albeit more artful and

subdued, and by this essay's conclusion, their two manifestoes will stand out from one another as unique and equally important paths, via literature, on the causeway to the ultimate end of integration and recognition of the African American's humanity.

In opening his *Blueprint*, Wright stated how “[g]enerally speaking, Negro writing in the past has been confined to humble novels, poems, and plays, prim and decorous ambassadors who went a-begging to white America” and it is a statement which suggests the need for reform in African American writers, past the status of “poodles who do clever tricks” (Wright 125). Regarding nationalism, defined by Wright as “a pre-conscious assumption, something which a writer takes for granted, something which he wins through his living” (130), Richard Wright believes African American nationalism is remarkable because “[being] barred for decades from the theater and publishing houses, Negro writers have been *made* to feel a sense of difference”, from which “the stunted plants of Negro nationalism grow” (127). To this effect, DuBois remarked “the young and slowly growing black public still wants its prophets almost equally unfree”, which puts it upon the African Americans’ “new young artists [...] to fight their way to freedom” (DuBois 777); a testament to the mutual feeling of discontent these authors had about their middle time between folklore and modern-day American literature. Wright believes African American literature’s “past has been confined to humble novels, poems, and plays, prim and decorous ambassadors who went a-begging to white America” (Wright 125) and while DuBois asserts that this results in generations of African Americans who “can afford Truth [while] [w]hite folk today cannot” (DuBois 777). Through these two quotes on the authors’ disillusioned opinions on African American writers’ relationship with white America, one can get a sense of an old soul behind

DuBois' direct prose, using "Truth" as a sacred noun, and the decorative and youthful language in Wright's criticism of African American literature's past entrapped purpose. As if in response to DuBois' sentiment on how "the worst side of [African Americans] has been so shamelessly emphasized that [African Americans] are deny [they] have or ever had a worst side" (DuBois 777), Wright ousts these remorseful thoughts and declares that African American writers "must accept the nationalist implications of their lives, not in order to encourage them, but in order to change and transcend them" (Wright 128). In their ultimate goal for what African American nationalism, the kind of nationalism that bears a malodorous past, must make of itself in order to gain recognition for its cohorts as equal human beings entitled to basic human rights, Wright and DuBois were in disagreement. On Wright's previously stated point, he continues writing "in order to transcend [nationalism], [African American writers] must possess and understand it" (128) as empirical means of achieving their recognition as humans, while DuBois argues "that until the art of the black folk compels recognition they will not be rated as human" (DuBois 778). While Wright postulates that African American art must create a sense of understanding between its participants, DuBois concludes that it truly serves to create understanding within a white audience. Perhaps Wright was right in mentioning how "the gap widens between [African American writers] and their people" (Wright 126) because of his firm belief that "the Negroes' most powerful images of hope and despair still remain in the fluid state of daily speech" rather than being "caught in paint or stone" (127). Perhaps Wright hit the mark when he instructed "those who shy at the nationalist implications of Negro life [to] look at this body of folklore, living and powerful, which rose out of a unified sense of a common life and a common fate" as being exemplary of

“value in life as it is *lived*” (127). DuBois summed this truth up as “the bounden duty of black America to begin this great work of the creation of beauty, of the preservation of beauty, of the realization of beauty, and [African Americans] must use in this work all the methods that men have used before” (DuBois 776). So for all their differences, Wright and DuBois shared an ideology of folklore being the golden standard to which African American writers must look in order to further the humanity of their writing.

“When Negro writers think they have arrived at something which smacks of truth, humanity, they should want to test it with others [...] to communicate it to millions who are groping like themselves” wrote Wright, wrapping his manifesto up with the words “every first rate novel, poem, or play lifts the level of consciousness higher” (Wright 132). Wright and DuBois were both interested in setting precedents for the African American writers of their time and beyond, so as to ensure they create a bright future for their people, one compelled by the power of their literature. As one can deduce by this point, DuBois was more interested in reaching an audience beyond African Americans, especially when he wrote to the affect of Wright’s previous quote how “[African Americans] are going to have a real and valuable and eternal judgment only as [they] make [them]selves free of mind, proud of body and just of soul to all men” (DuBois 777). For a man addressing an African American “group of radicals” with the question “what have [African Americans] who are slaves and black to do with Art” (771), DuBois intelligently put the importance of the question into context when he wrote “just as soon as the black artist appears, someone touches the race on the shoulder and says, “He did that because he was an American, not because he was a Negro” (777). It is a keen observation that drives the humanist precedent DuBois makes home, and puts into

perspective the function art serves in society as an agent of change; in this case, the breakdown of the racial barrier which boxes the works of African American writers so that they can be seen as American writers equal, if not greater, than their white contemporaries. In both men's thoughts however, it is imperative that African American writers not abandon their American nationalism, as Wright weighed in on its value as "something which a writer takes for granted, something which he wins through his living" (Wright 130). The Black writer's perspective in America, especially in the South, was and continues to be wholly unique from the Caucasian or Asian writer's perspective on America, especially because Wright and DuBois insist that there is a collective goal African Americans must strive for through art, which is both a burden to and validation of the work of an African American writer. From this developed sense of perspective, Wright sheds the need for "isms", whether an African American writer is to "preach", "prostitute" or "sully" their work, by boiling down the purpose of the African American writer in society to "a question of awareness, of consciousness; [and] above all, a question of perspective" (130). To prove the perspective of the African American writer as unique, yet every bit as American as their American contemporaries, DuBois wrote how "[African Americans] realize [the value of material] sooner than the average white American because, pushed aside as [African Americans] have been in America, there has come to [them] not only a certain distaste for the tawdry and flamboyant but a vision of what the world could be if it were really a beautiful world" (DuBois 772). This sentiment can only be rooted in the ugliness that surrounded African Americans every waking minute and preyed on their loved ones incessantly in antebellum times and beyond. To be an African American is to have this awareness of the wretched spots littered through

America's history which reverberate to this day, and for the scars inflicted, African American writers become an exceptional commodity to having an enlightened society; their perspective being valuable to this day in a generation about 200 years bloomed past the dark soil of slavery.

Modern day African Americans still have much to fear in being protected and served by a faulty system, which few would agree is anywhere near being a just one, but African Americans are regardless recognized as free and equal to their white brethren and no prejudice is just in the eye of American law. In his reflection on American decency, recounting an experience of obnoxious Americans at a quaint Scottish lake, DuBois wrote how the Americans "struck a note not evil but wrong. They carried, perhaps, a sense of strength and accomplishment, but their hearts had no conception of the beauty which pervaded this holy place" (DuBois 772). For the sake of the actualization African American writers, Wright begs them to rediscover their "lost heritage, that is, [their] role as [creators] of the world in which [they live], and as [creators] of [themselves]", simultaneously pushing his cosmopolitan agenda by "borrow[ing] a phrase from the Russians, [African American literature] should have a *complex simplicity*" (Wright 129). "We must come to the place where the work of art when it appears is reviewed and acclaimed by our own free and unfettered judgment" (DuBois 777) writes DuBois on his hopes for the future, and this promised future came the year after DuBois's death, with the 1964 Civil Rights Act. And regarding which public African American writers have ultimately served, there comes a return to Wright's question which opened this essay, for African American literature has firstly served "the Negro masses, moulding the lives and consciousness of those toward new goals" and has secondly bestowed upon the world

proof of “the Negroes’ humanity” (Wright 127), and we thrive as a generation shaped in our ridding of prejudice by the criteria Wright and DuBois put forth for the freedom-writers. DuBois was right when he declared “the real solution of the color problem” that segregated America was “recognition accorded [to] Colleen, Hughes, Fauset, White and others [that] shows there is no real color line” (DuBois 774).

For setting precedents on what it means to be an African American writer by exploring the African American writer’s nationalist responsibilities, the extent of their impact on their audiences and defining what entails the modern African American writer, Wright’s and Dubois’ manifestoes are indispensable agents of change to African American literature. After Wright’s publication of *Native Son*, “American culture was changed forever” (Irving Howe 353) and the NAACP, which DuBois co-founded, along with his body of work, helped usher in the civil rights imperative for dissembling prejudice against African Americans and ultimately erase the lines that segregated a nation. With their manifestoes, Wright and DuBois clued in on the faults of African American writers and pointed them in a focused direction so that they may united become the harbingers of an African American literary tradition recognized for its truth, reality, and above all, humanity.

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